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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the usage of testing instruments to identify the language and dialect dominance of children. In order not to misuse language assessment tests, a careful distinction must be made between the terms "language proficiency," "language preference," and "relative language proficiency." Differences in the several types of language assessment instruments must also be taken into consideration. These differences include type of data provided, such as information on pronunciation or syntax, and required skill levels for test administrators and evaluators. Questionnaires, story-telling, question-answer format, and combination tests, such as the Language Ability Scales (LAS), are examples of language assessment instruments requiring different skills and measuring different features. An example is given of a language assessment model that yields only limited information, due to lack of sufficient preparation on the part of the administrators. It is suggested that the following model should be followed: (1) tests must be selected with specific criteria in mind; (2) the test administrators should meet certain qualifications, such as sufficient training; (3) the primary investigator should have formal linguistic training; and (4) an in-service course should be given, to those responsible for usage of test results, in the areas of sociolinguistics, structure of Standard American English and dialects tested, and language acquisition. (Author/AM)

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LANGUAGE DOMINANCE TESTING: SOME QUESTIONS

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The Lau vs Nichols decision and AB 1329 require that children in the State of California be evaluated to determine the dominant language for each child. Thus, many of us must deal with the problem of oral language assessment of school children. This paper will concentrate on a particular aspect of that problem, namely the uses and mis-uses of language assessment tests. It will do this by 1) distinguishing between proficiency and dominance tests used as oral language assessment instruments; 2) describing several different basic types of language assessment tests, giving an example of each, and specifying some of the advantages and disadvantages, limitations and capabilities of each type; 3) discussing an example of the administration, evaluation and use of a language assessment test; and finally 4) giving some conclusions about the uses and limitations of language assessment tests, and specifying some of the requirements for those who administer, evaluate and apply the results of language tests.

First, we must distinguish between language proficiency and between two types of language dominance: language preference and relative language proficiency. Proficiency in a language refers to a person's level of ability in that language. A complete proficiency test covers all four areas of language.

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usage: speech, listening, reading and writing. In addition, it tests pronunciation, syntax (including morphology), lexicon and semantics. Such a test must determine the student's abilities in each of these areas, in each relevant language, and also must present these results in a form that enables determinations to be made as to whether and where language instruction is needed, what prescriptive techniques might be of help, etc.

Dominance, on the other hand, has several definitions. The most common two are presented and used here. First, language preference, the more popular definition, says that a child's dominant language is that language (or dialect) in which the child is more comfortable in an unstructured situation. Thus, a child's dominant language or dialect would be the one he would choose to use if given the opportunity. This choice may change depending upon the situation or domain in which the child finds himself, for example, whether he is speaking on the playground, in school, in his community, or in his home. He may feel more comfortable using English in school, Spanish in church, and a mixture of the two at home.

For more scientific purposes, however, language dominance should be determined as Burt and Dulay (in press) suggest, by testing the relative ability of the student in two languages or dialects. This would be determined as a result of a proficiency test given in both languages or dialects. The data obtained from such tests should give verifiable information as to the student's actual proficiency in both languages, regardless of his preferences in any one situation.

However, with respect to the way in which language assessment tests are normally implemented and their results applied in the classroom, these three categories become confused. A test may have been intended to show language preference, but instructions for the test will imply that the test will also give an indication of the child's language proficiency. Thus, these three terms come to be used carelessly, loosely, and interchangeably. We must be careful to distinguish between them. A test which has been designed and is intended to show which of two languages a child prefers or is more comfortable with, should not be mis-used by trying to employ it to place the child at a discrete language proficiency level.

The point here is that by being careful to distinguish between the terms proficiency, language preference, and relative language proficiency, we will be able to be more selective both in choosing a language assessment instrument and in using (and not mis-using) the results obtained from that instrument. Thus, we will be able to avoid using a test intended to determine the language preference of the child to determine proficiency levels for the child or to determine the relative language dominance. We need to consider our use of this terminology, and hopefully in this way better meet the needs of our children in terms of language identification and prescription.

Several types of language assessment instruments will be described in this section and are summarized in the accompanying table. One of the purposes of this section is to point out some important ways in which these types of tests differ. These differences are relevant both in determining which test we choose for a specific situation and purpose, and also for determining how we will use a given test, for example, whether we use it to test language proficiency or language preference.

One of the ways in which the summarized tests differ, is in the type of data that they provide. How much information is obtained ranges from a complete record of the student's responses on a tape, to only a simple numerical or yes/no score showing whether the student did or did not respond as expected (or at all). The tests also differ in whether they provide information about pronunciation, morphology, lexicon or syntax, as well as whether listening or speaking are being tested. We should note that the amount and type of information made available by a test will have an important affect on what types of analysis can later be performed and what types of information can be obtained about the student's abilities, the prescriptive techniques that can be applied, etc.

Specific examples of these language assessment tests differ in the levels of skills that are required. The administrator of the test may need to just operate a cassette, show pictures, or ask questions. The transcriber may just

need a check sheet, may be required to take down the responses verbatim in handwriting, or may need trained phonological skills. The evaluator may just be required to use counting skills, or may need formal linguistic training. The person who will make use of the test may need various skills, depending on to what use he/she will put the results of the test, e.g. to implement new curriculum.

As we shall see then, the use to which the tests are put will determine what kinds of skills the test administrator and evaluator will need.

The first test in the table is the questionnaire. As can readily be seen, it is only useful for identifying language preferences. A language assessment questionnaire such as the San Diego Home Language Survey (which has been adopted as part of the state's California Language Census), is only intended to identify languages used in the home. Typically this type of test is used as a gross identifier and is followed, as required, by a more complete assessment tool.

Story-telling, the second type of test in the table, has broader possibilities. The child is given a picture and is asked to tell, or make up a story about the picture. Advantages of this type of test, exemplified by the Basic Inventory of Natural Language (BINL) are that it elicits natural language from the student, and that it can provide a good deal of information, particularly related to overall verbalness. This type of test can be suitable for proficiency determinations, if enough data on appropriate structures is available and analyzed. Disadvantages are that it is

difficult to elicit specific structures, and to elicit those structures more than once for verification is almost impossible. In addition, phonological characteristics cannot be reliably tested for the same reasons. The test can also be mis-used, if only a small portion of the data is analyzed (an understandable temptation, since transcription can be very time-consuming. Finally, because of the large amount of data to be analyzed of a non-structured kind, evaluators may need more than just a normal knowledge of the language tested to make fair assessments.

The question-answer format is another of the types of tests suggested here. Examples of this type of test are the Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM) and the San Diego Observation Assessment Instrument (which has also been adopted as part of the California Language Census). As with the story-telling format, a picture is used as stimulus, but specific questions are asked about the pictures to elicit specific structures, lexical items, etc. Also, since there is a more limited amount of natural language obtained, evaluation is more limited and easier to accomplish. Although this is a more efficient system it is more structured so that the free speech obtained is of a more limited variety. Another disadvantage is that the questions have to be very carefully constructed so that the precise response will in fact be elicited. Also, pronunciation can again only be analyzed as a side issue, since any one sound will not necessarily be elicited from the student. Given the above considerations, this test may also be suitable for proficiency or language preference testing.

The final type is the repetition test, such as the Gloria and David. Sentences are imitated usually from a taped model. This type is particularly good for studying sound usage, since all utterances are prescribed and discrete items can be repeated for verification. Also, this mode is effective for identifying non-standard dialect usage, since many non-standard speakers will translate the standard dialect that they hear into their own dialect. The Gloria and David is particularly appropriate with its many instances of plural, possessive and third person singular morphemes. Disadvantages of the repetition test are first that no natural or spontaneous production can be expected. Also, only limited information can be obtained since the model will speak correctly structured sentences for the subjects to model. The model's language usage may also serve as a detriment, as is evidenced by the unnatural pronunciation heard on some tapes. Additional potential problems are the effects of the students' short attention and memory spans, and the selection of the items to be imitated. This type of test would have limited application to proficiency decisions, though may be appropriate for language preference distinctions.

These several types of tests are not always used in isolation. The Language Ability Scales (LAS) combines the repetition and question-answer modes, for example. Many school districts will use a combination of instruments.

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The California Language Census (adopted state instrument) which is based on the San Diego model, begins with the Home Language Survey, is usually followed by observation of unstructured speech on the playground and is then followed when appropriate by a specific assessment test.

Now we will look at a specific example of the administration, analysis and use of a language assessment test. With the help of the information presented in the previous sections of this paper^{we} will be able to see some of the capabilities and the limitations of such a test and some of the ways in which the results of such a test can be used and mis-used.

In this example, 375 children in grades K through 3 were tested. All the children were of American Indian heritage, and most were from a single tribe. The English version of the Gloria and David repetition test was administered, and all responses were tape recorded. The individual who was assigned the task of analyzing the responses was given the goal of discovering and identifying the language characteristics of the children's speech. The teachers of the students were primarily interested in feedback that could be turned immediately into prescriptive devices.

The test was administered over a period of several days by two people who had training in giving tests. Because of their training, there was consistency in overall procedures. Five graduate students who had previous training

in making phonological transcriptions, transcribed the 375 tapes. From the transcriptions, basic information could be drawn directly, specifically a list of characteristics which might provide simple proficiency levels of pronunciation.

In many situations, that would have been the extent of the analysis given. However, because the evaluation was done by professionals in the field, further analysis was available.

The primary investigator had a background in the native language of the community and therefore was able to relate the identified differences at the phonological and morphological levels. No differences could be related at other levels because of the limitations of the Gloria and David test. Not only were differences noted across students within the same class and across classes, but across different grades as well. Also, overall patterns were identified, for example the existence of a glottal stop throughout the children's tapes, and the apparent disappearance of some distinguishing characteristics in the older children.

With such specific information about the language background of the children available, potentially prescriptive suggestions for language training could have been given. However, two weaknesses in the testing situation did not allow such determinations: first, only English was tested, and second, a repetition test with only one verb structure (simple present, third person) had been used. Consequently, recommendations were made that additional testing be conducted using another type of instrument (the BINL).

Even so, at this point the information that had been obtained from the analysis of the Gloria and David test, was not particularly relevant or meaningful to the teachers, since they were not linguists. For this reason, an in-service was planned to acquaint the teachers ^{both} with the information that had been obtained, and with the differences between American Standard English (ASE) and the native language of the area. This kind of background knowledge would have eventually enabled the teachers to develop new curriculum (with the additional information from further testing), place students in appropriate language proficiency levels for instruction, and in general meet the needs of the students.

As mentioned above, this model worked only to a limited extent. The test was chosen before decisions were made as to what types of analysis were to be performed. The test did not provide sufficient information in all areas to make determinations of proficiency levels possible. It did provide a strong indication of the extent to which a non-standard "accent" was used by the students. The test also identified some students who may have extremely limited English skills. Even the latter gross identifications, however, may have been affected by the students' reactions to the testing situation. It was recommended that additional testing be done before any final decisions be made, and this was accomplished. It should be noted that in another situation, the teachers

might have taken the insufficient and incomplete results from the initial test, used that to make determinations about the children's "proficiency" levels, and made prescriptive decisions to be implemented in the classroom.

In addition to the fact that language proficiency decisions could not be made, language dominance determinations also could not be made with any authority. Since only the English version of the test was given, no comparison with the students' skills in another language was possible. Comparisons with ASE and a non-standard dialect could be considered, and were, but again only at the phonological and morphological levels. We conclude that only limited information could be obtained from this model and that this information was primarily concerned with the children's pronunciation.

In summary, we are now faced with making oral language assessments as a necessary part of our evaluation of our students' needs. However, we must separate out that which we can and should use, from that which is less usable, or non-informative. We must also be willing to take the time to prepare ourselves to do an efficient job, not only of the testing itself, but of understanding what that testing means in terms of categorizing our students.

We must also begin to understand the terminology involved: proficiency testing is not the same as dominance testing. One's proficiency is one's ability level in a language, in this case not just speaking ability, but listening ability, and for older students reading and writing abilities too. Dominance, on the other hand, refers either to 1) one's preference regarding language usage in whatever situation; or 2) one's relative abilities in relation to another language or dialect. The first is a "popular dominance" as opposed to the second which is a more scientific definition of dominance. Both are important concepts, but must be looked at as separate items.

In conclusion, I suggest that we consider the following model for language assessment procedures. First, the test itself should meet certain criteria. It should provide the information needed for the type of analysis desired. It should be clear as to what type of test it is, regarding language preference, proficiency or relative proficiency. The test should also be identified in terms of what it attempts to do, re test pronunciation, syntax, etc. The primary investigator may be helpful in this selection process.

Next, the administrators of the test should have the following qualifications. They should have sufficient training in testing in general, so as to be as objective and consistent as possible in their methodology. The tester should also have enough information about what the specific test is designed, or intended to do, so that the he/she will not inadvertently elicit unuseful information.

Those who are employed in the transcription of the child's responses, presumably from tapes, should have had linguistic training in phonological transcriptions. In addition, they should be familiar with typical deviations of the group tested and with the language or dialects of the group tested. They should also be trained in such a way as to produce consistent transcriptions across different transcribers. Other scorers should have equally sufficient training.

The primary investigator of the analysis should have formal linguistic training. The investigator should be familiar with the structure of ASE as well as with the linguistic contrasts between the relevant languages. In addition, this person should be well primed in the strengths and weaknesses of the test being used, and be aware of additional analysis which is possible from the existing data.

Finally, an in-service should be given to those who will use the results of the test. This in-service should provide basic knowledge of the structure of ASE (phonological, morphological and syntactic). It also should provide the basic contrasts between the relevant languages and dialects. In addition, sociolinguistic information regarding the language and culture of the students involved should be given. As well, the teachers should be made familiar with the test, e.g. how it was given, what was analyzed, what was found.

Only then, should the inservice focus on curriculum development, with specific regard to language development for the students involved in the language assessment.

If these guidelines are followed, perhaps some of the mis-use, and mis-interpretations of data that continues daily, will be avoided. The tests that are given will be done with a specific purpose, and will be given, and evaluated by trained personnel, preferably not those who are already over-burdened with classroom tasks. At that point, we may be able to meet the needs of our students who have been identified through language assessment procedures, in compliance with state and national regulations.

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LANGUAGE DOMINANCE TESTING: SOME QUESTIONS

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TABLE I: Comparison of Basic Language Assessment Tests

POTENTIAL FOR:	Questionnaire	Story-Telling	Question-Answer	Repetition
Language preference	x	x	x	x
Language proficiency	no	x	x	limited
Relative proficiency	no	x	x	limited
Areas tested:				
pronunciation	no	limited	limited	x
morphology	no	limited	x	x
syntax	no	unstructured	x	limited
lexicon	no	unstructured	x	limited
listening	no	limited	x	x
speaking	no	x	x	limited
reading	na	na	na	na
writing	na	na	na	na
Taped response	no	yes or no	yes or no	yes or no
Natural language elicited	no	x	limited	no
Training required of:				
tester	limited	required	required	limited
scorer	limited	required	required	required
evaluator	limited	ling.training	ling.training	ling.training
Stimulus	questions	picture	picture	taped model
Add'l analysis	no	x	x	x
Subjective/Objective	objective	either	either	either
Ease of eliciting structures	na	difficult	fairly easy	easy
External interference	na	limited	limited	memory, attn span
Examples	San Diego Home Survey	Basic Inventory of Nat'l Language	Bilingual Syntax Measure; Calif State test	Gloria & David

x = test is appropriate and effective in this area
na = not applicable